

The dramatic story of a young Texas prospector and his

I struck it rich

by Charles A. Steen AS TOLD

This time last year I couldn't pay my grocery bill or even afford to get new soles for my boots. My wife, Minnie Lee, and I and our four sons were wearing patched clothing, eating mostly beans and illegal venison and living in a shack that had little furniture, makeshift kitchen facilities and no water or electricity.

Today at the age of 33, along with my family, I control a uranium mine for which we recently turned down an offer of \$5,000,000. I drive a new car, own a five-place airplane and have plans for a home in Mexico.

If I have proved anything, I have proved that a poor man can still make a million dollars in a hurry in America. But we have worked hard for it and I am proud that not a cent of government money went into what we have done. We have earned our money. We didn't inherit it, we didn't steal it.

Almost everybody dreams sometime of making a million dollars. Even as a kid I was determined to make the dream come true. I knew it could be done because my father had made a fortune in oil when he was 21 although he lost it by the time he was 23. And I knew what it was to be without money, because during the depression our family was desperately poor. The combination of need and the speculator's desire to strike it rich—passed on to me by my father—gave me a driving ambition to seek and find a fortune.

I worked my way through high school in Houston, Texas. Studying general science there, I first got the idea of becoming a geologist or prospector. The work was all outside, which I liked, and there was always the chance of the million-dollar jackpot.

I started at John Tarleton College near Houston—that's where I met my wife—then went on to the Texas College of Mines in El Paso, where I got my degree in geology.

I explored for oil in South America, where I learned more about geology from an oldtimer, Andy McGill—now with our company—than I ever learned at college. Then I prospected for gold in Canada before finally going into the "Four Corners" country, where the borders of Utah, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico meet, with just one idea—to make a quick million dollars starting from scratch.

Minnie Lee and I landed in Dove Creek, Colorado, in July, 1950.

That was one rough summer. Sometimes we had nothing to eat but oatmeal and what really hurt was that there were a few times when we couldn't afford to buy milk for our baby, Mark, who was six weeks old. My mother, who lives in Houston, had to borrow \$1,000 to pay for my second-hand diamond core drill.

Then she sold her rental property, her sole source of income, bit by bit in order to keep us in meager groceries.

The coming of winter forced us out of Dove Creek. Christmas Day we moved to Yellow Cat Mining District near Cisco, Utah, where we spent the winter prospecting on some claims that seemed to me to have possibilities. That spring my mother had a heart attack. She finally recovered, but the doctor bills had taken almost every cent she had.

I was unable to interest anyone in putting up a few hundred dollars that I needed to prospect the claims in Yellow Cat, so I moved off them only to find out later that others struck ore on these claims after we left.

We went to Tucson, Arizona. By this time I was dead broke, so in desperation I took a carpenter's job. Finally I managed to scrape together \$700. It was enough for us either to go back to prospecting and try our luck again—or go to New York and get a fine-paying but frustrating geology job in South America, working for one of the big oil companies.

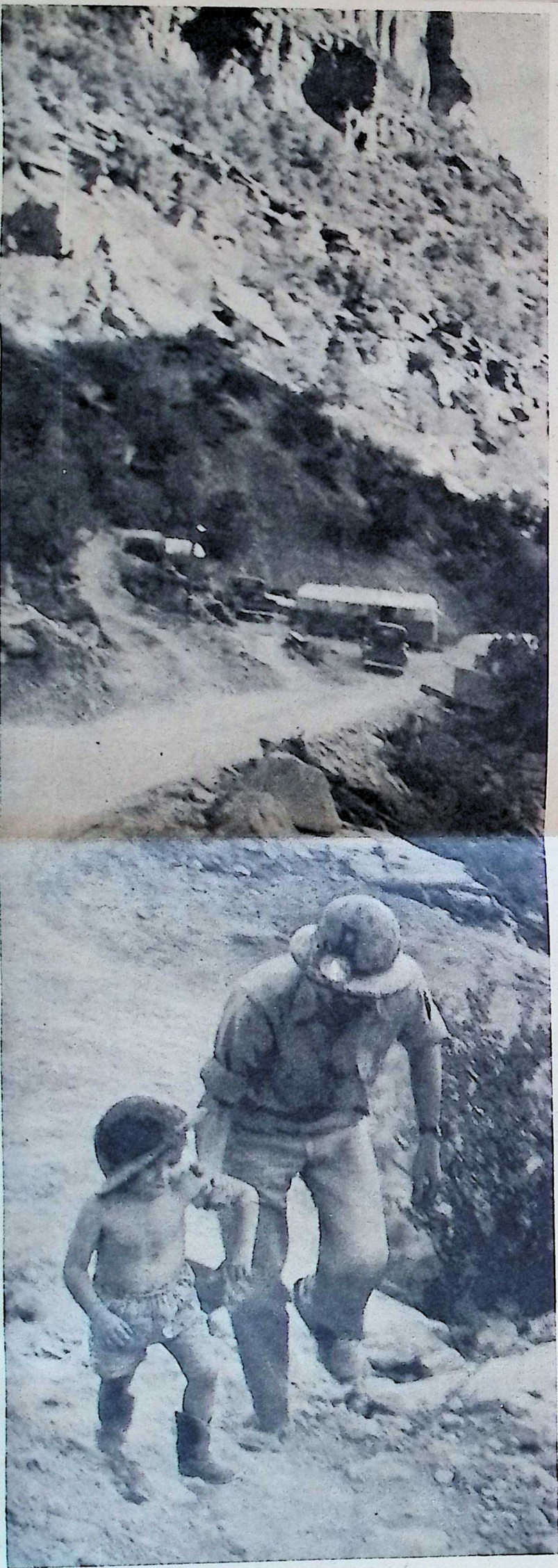
I left it up to M. L. Since the first day I met her at Tarleton College she had been aware that I suffered from acute prospecting fever. She thought then that I was nuts—a grown man playing with rocks—and remembers that I didn't even look at her the first time we met.

We didn't get married until several years after, and by the time we went up into "Four Corners" M. L. had become a rock enthusiast herself, along with the kids. But some of her family and friends had been needling her about her ne'er-do-well husband. Why didn't he get himself a job like normal people?

So I left it up to her. She knew I was convinced there was real pay dirt on the claims we had staked. She insisted we go back to Utah.

We bundled the kids into the jeep. We looked like something out of *The Grapes of Wrath*, I'll admit, but we were in fine spirits and full of hope. We pulled into Cisco, Utah, late one afternoon and rented a two-room shack for \$15 a month. Our first night there, M. L. came down with pneumonia. This meant a 10-day stretch in the hospital for her and a week on her back when she got home.

With our grubstake money already gone, I went back down to Dove Creek and persuaded a friend of mine to loan me a drill and put up enough money to build a road into the claims that I had staked some two years before in the Big Indian Mining District in San Juan County, Utah. By that time I had tried in Houston, Grand Junction, and Salt Lake City and all points in between to get someone to gamble with me on these claims but a lot of



Charlie Steen helps three-year-old Mark up the trail through the rugged area where the Steens finally found uranium, after experts who had prospected the territory said none was there.

family who—though broke and hungry—refused to quit

with Uranium

TO JAMES AND MIRIAM SKARDON

individuals let me cool my heels in outer offices and then turned me down flat.

The area in which I had such faith had been known for years. The low grade uranium ore exposed on the rim had been examined and rejected by the experts of many major mining companies. Nevertheless, without arguing with the experts, I had filed 12 claims in the Big Indian District, and called them the Linda Mujur group.

After I had my group staked, I bulldozed a road to my drilling site and moved in my old beat-up core drill. The capacity of the drill was rated at 100 feet. I had it down to 197 feet when I twisted off the drill stem in the hole. Now the drill stem and I were both "broke."

Back to Cisco I went to get a fishing tool to try to recover my drill stem, core barrel and bit out of the hole in the ground. Almost as an afterthought, I picked up some of the core the drill had turned out and put it in my pocket. At Cisco I stopped to see my friend Buddy Cowger, who runs a garage and was prospecting for uranium himself.

I never had had the spare cash to buy a Geiger counter myself so I occasionally borrowed Buddy's. He recently had brought in some stuff from one of his claims that had a slight kick, and insisted on

showing it to me. Jokingly I said, "I've got something that will beat that," and I put my two-inch piece of core to the Geiger counter.

The needle jumped out of sight.

I forgot that the jeep was outside with the motor running. I dashed out the back door into the noon sun. I ran a block to our shack, jerked open the door and yelled to M.L., "We've hit it, we've hit it. It's a million-dollar lick!"

"Boy," M.L. told me, "you've been out in the sun too long."

The stuff that I had picked up without a second glance, because it contained no yellow, was uraninite—more commonly known as pitchblende, primary ore of uranium. We kept it a secret for weeks while I staked claims around my original 12 and six claims for Buddy. He sold his early and got \$25,000 cash. After I had staked all the ground that I wanted, I announced my fabulous find.

But only a few would believe me. The local prospectors and the uranium experts labeled my claims "Steen's Folly." They called me a crackpot and a crooked promoter. I was accused of "salting" the hole with pitchblende in order to get money, although I don't know where I could have gotten the pitchblende to do the salting.

It took four months to get the mine in produc-

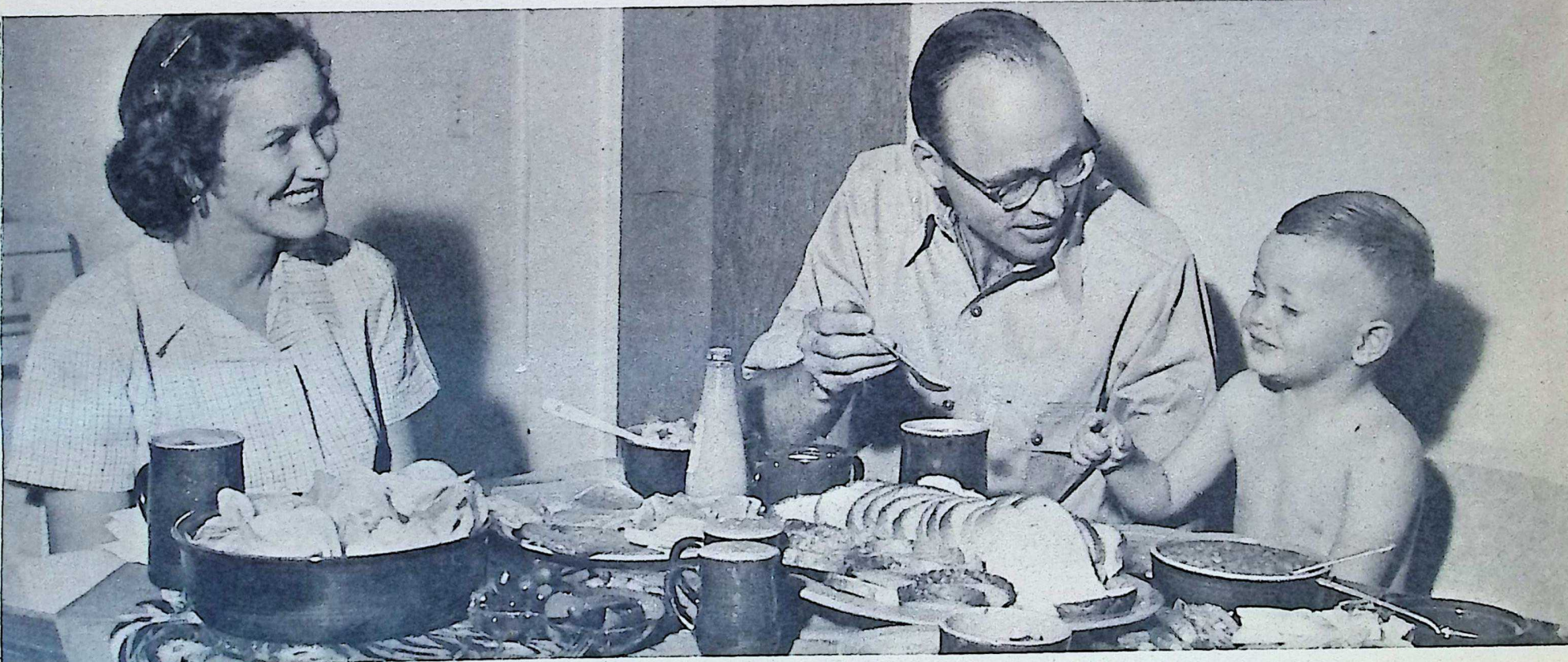


Mr. and Mrs. Steen—and son Mark—dressed for an inspection of the mine which Charlie discovered with a "beat-up" drill and a friend's Geiger counter.

tion. The first 19 truck loads of ore out of the shaft brought \$11,400 and I was on my way. And now the mine is producing \$10,000 worth of ore a day, with promise of going even higher. All we do is load it into the trucks the way it is, without sorting, and haul it to the uranium mill.

After the mining got going, M.L. and I parked the kids in Houston with my mother and spent two weeks vacationing in Mexico. Last month we threw a \$3,000 party for our miners and invited the people of two counties. We figured that the time had come for a little celebration. Otherwise, the life we live hasn't changed too much.

We pay ourselves a salary and put most of the money back into equipment for the mine. We live in a small rented apartment, though we plan to own a home in Utah, as well as Mexico, one of these days. The catch is that every time I inquire about a piece of property, the price immediately jumps. The owners think their land has uranium on it!



Photographs by George A. Kew

Minnie Lee, Charlie and Mark can enjoy a hearty meal whenever they want—now. But they still remember the days, before they were rich, when they ate "mostly beans and illegal venison" and baby Mark lived on sugared tea because they couldn't afford milk.



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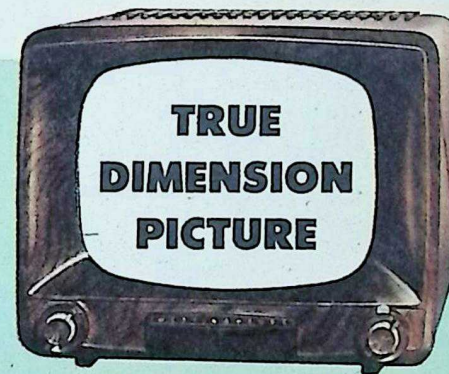
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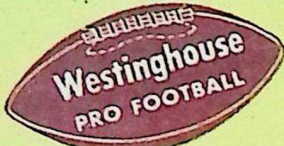
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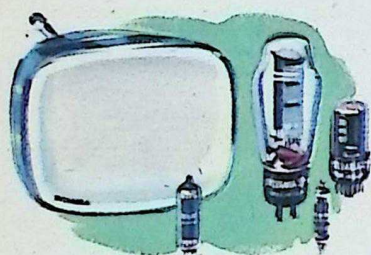
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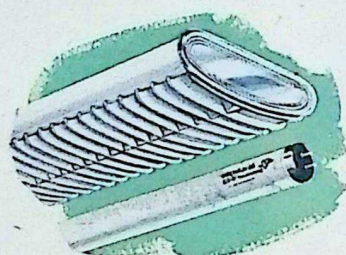
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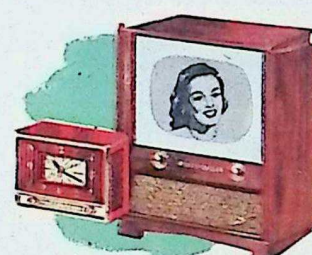
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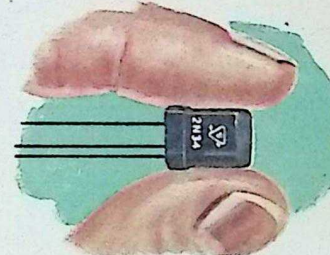
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